

Blending the Modern with the Traditional

By LEA TERHUNE

Astad Deboo brings his unique dance style to the United States.



KANU TAKENO/Towson University

The creative arts are prized avenues of cultural interaction at many American universities, including Maryland's Towson University. Its newly renovated Creative Arts Building hums with music, rehearsals, set and costume creation, and the cadences of dancers' feet. Last fall, the center showcased India with an exhibition of paintings by modern Indian artists in the Asian Arts Gallery and by hosting guest faculty member Astad Deboo, India's premier modern dancer.

Seated in the art gallery, surrounded by works of India's most famous contemporary painters—Jamini Roy, M.F. Husain, S.H. Raza, Shobha Broota, G.R. Santosh, Manjit Bawa and others—Deboo spoke of his long relationship with the United States. It began when he saw the Murray Louis Dance Company, on a U.S. State Department-sponsored India tour, in 1967. "I was amazed. It was the first time I really saw an American modern dance company perform," he said.

Deboo was trained in two Indian classical dance styles: *Kathakali*, a dance-drama from South India, and *Kathak*, a storytelling form patronized by the royal courts in North India. Both are demanding styles, but *Kathakali* requires tremendous strength to dance in its heavy costumes.

When Deboo saw American dancer and choreographer Murray Louis, he was looking for "a new vocabulary," he says. "I had noticed in India among Indian artists—visual art, music, literature—that there was some contemporary move-

ment happening, whereas in dance it was all very Indian classical work." Uday Shankar had explored modern dance in the early 20th century, but the emphasis in India remained on classical interpretations.

Deboo came to the United States in 1974, where he spent several years studying modern dance techniques with American masters. He worked particularly with Alison Chase, longtime guiding light of the Pilobolus Dance Company. Deboo returned to India, incorporated elements learned, and introduced his own style of contemporary dance in India. His repertoire evolved as he worked with artists in Japan, Indonesia and elsewhere.

"I love to introduce people, and I love to introduce Astad as the father of modern dance in India. I think that's a fabulous, fabulous title to have," says Jay Herzog, Theater Arts Department chairman at Towson University and Deboo admirer. He facilitated Deboo's invitation to teach for a week at the university through a Rosenberg Distinguished Artist Endowment grant to artists whose work bridges theater and dance. Deboo's presence also reflected Towson's goal of integrating multicultural issues into the academic curriculum. "It is imperative on the college level that we bring art to the United States for the students to see," he says.

Deboo's lively classes—in which he demonstrates the facial expressions and gestures so critical in Indian classical dance—piqued students' interest.

"What I teach is a mixture of Indian as well as contemporary body vocabulary, which they can relate to because of their own training in ballet or other modern dance techniques," Deboo says.

The response was "broad smiles and embraces....At the end of every class you can look into the eyes of the students and know that they have

really taken something away from his lectures," Herzog says.

That Deboo is a gifted teacher is evident in his success and commitment to working with the deaf, something he began in India about 15 years ago. He spent several summers working with Tim McCarthy at the Gallaudet University for the deaf performing arts program in Washington. The result of that collaboration was the well-received "Road Signs" tour in India by a troupe drawn from Gallaudet and Deboo's Indian students in 1995.

Over the years, Deboo has seen change. "People are more accepting now of seeing Indian contemporary dance," he says.

Globalization of culture has transformed the performing arts. In Asia, he says, "people have become more aware of their own culture and style and they want to use that as a base to develop new work...bringing in other elements, but keeping our roots."

"Coming from old tradition and presenting under a contemporary umbrella...tradition also moves on. There is a lot of reverence; there are a lot of things that are not dispensed of. [Tradition] is still there," he says.

Today ideas may be exchanged in various ways, including by videos. "Exchanges are always good because it gets you to talk with each other, it gets you to see each other's work and it's very important that artists see what the others are doing," Deboo says.

"There is this conversation which has been happening...and continues to happen" among artists all over the world, Deboo says. "The world is getting smaller," he adds. "There are no boundaries for us...there is the room which allows us to be individual, and have the right to express."



Lea Terhune is a USINFO staff writer.

For more information:

Murray Louis

<http://www.nikolaislouis.org/Foundation.html>

Towson University

www.towson.edu/

Astad Deboo

www.gallaudet.edu/